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Painting the Seasons of the Flint Hills

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KONZA PRAIRIE SUNSET

Paintings by Louis Copt

Painting the Seasons of the Flint Hills

To truly understand the Flint Hills, they must be experienced in every season—not just the eye-numbing green of spring, but the explosion of the summer wildflowers to the red and golden grasses of fall, and the deep purple and mauve shadows of winter.



Painting the Flint Hills in every season is like visiting old friends. They may be up to something different each time you see them, but—at their core—they are the same each time.

William Allen White of the *Emporia Gazette* wrote an interesting editorial in June 1935 called “Flint Hills Rhapsody” where he describes the impossibility of an artist being able to “catch the majesty of the Flint Hills.”

*If you try to crowd it into a canvas
between a four-sided frame, it vanishes...
No canvas can ever hold the Flint Hills*

*because their feeling is one of freedom . . .
no pigment squeezed from any tube can
show that limitless stretching away,
that reaching out without end, that
freedom which is in the Flint Hills.*

I have a great deal of respect for William Allen White. In fact, I worked at his newspaper for several years as a photographer and writer before embarking on my painting career. I feel, however, that I must take issue with his view about capturing the Flint Hills on canvas. I count myself as one of a whole host of artists who do a pretty good job

of capturing the essence of the Flint Hills on canvas. It is indeed a difficult task to express the “freedom which is the Flint Hills” through painting, but it is just this challenge that inspires me.

Every season offers a new invitation to understand the interconnectedness of the prairie—to understand and appreciate the fact that the prairie lives and breathes. The seasons reflect renewal, fullness, abundance, and rest. And the Flint Hills for me are a constant source of new artistic material.

Every season has its own beauty in the Flint Hills. In the spring there is the possibility of storms with flash floods and tornadoes. Nature summons me to witness Her power firsthand. Approaching storms move quickly, and I have been soaked by more than one. No one needs a clearer reminder of the power of nature than seeing a cottonwood tree exploded and hollowed out by a blast of lightning. Then the air, once cleaned by a thunderstorm, becomes crisp and sharp.

The prairie fires—seen from a distance on a quiet evening—seem magical, mesmerizing, and benign. But, up close, the heat and smoke make me feel I am at the gates of Hades with no escape. I thrive on translating paint into light.

Exploring in the summer is the safest and most pleasant. Skies are blue, fluffy clouds pass by and cattle dot the landscape like ants in the distance. Sunsets can be dramatic, and at night, stars stretch like a dome overhead all the way to the horizon. Think about the last time you really saw the Milky Way, and then venture out to these magnificently light-deprived hills and look again.

In the fall, a sea of swelling red, orange, and burnt sienna grasses invite a whole new palette of color from the French easel. Russet colors briefly warm the landscape as the days grow shorter.

In winter, the possibility of getting stuck in a snow drift twenty miles away from the nearest paved road when the temperature is below zero and the sunlight is fading has not stopped me



HIDDEN POND



SNOWY PATH

yet. The ice storms that transform the landscape into a glittering tapestry of frozen diamonds are breathtaking.

People often ask me, “When is the best time to visit the Flint Hills?” I usually reply, “Now,” because experiencing the Flint Hills can be life-changing. Those folks, used to the urban environment, are often astonished by the Flint Hills’ vastness, humbled by their diversity, and inspired by their beauty.

To me, painting the Flint Hills is not only a celebration of the landscape, but

a celebration of beauty. As author Terry Tempest Williams said, “Beauty is not optional but essential to our survival as a species. It resides in the soul of every conversation . . . beauty nourishes our soul and allows us to remember what not only is possible and what we are capable of as human beings, but what is necessary.” What makes the Flint Hills unique is that they have not been chopped up into smaller and smaller pieces like the urban and former rural landscape most of us find ourselves

living in. Painting the Flint Hills is one way of preserving them and recording history for future generations.

Despite the words from William Allen White, I find it immensely challenging and rewarding to try to capture the beauty of the Flint Hills on canvas and watercolor paper. I am attracted by the experience of feeling the wind, watching the light change minute by minute, seeing the cloud shadows dance across the hills and valleys, and soaking up the silence and vastness of the horizon.

Everyone who visits the Flint Hills has a different experience based on his or her way of looking at the world. The artist sees the Flint Hills in his or her own unique way as well. Paintings of the Flint Hills are like conversations between the artist and the viewer. I see the role of the artist as one who, through paint and canvas, isolates and distills the essence of a scene into a compact story that tells the viewer “this is what I see, this is how I feel, this is what I think is important.” The viewer can pause in front of the

painting and with no words exchanged, feel the artist’s presence, passion, and purpose, and come away inspired by the landscape and how it is presented.

People who have never traveled to the Flint Hills in person can still appreciate the nuances and power of a painting. But, in my experience, one who sees and approaches a painting having experienced the scene in reality—like a prairie fire, storm, or summer sunset—makes a deeper connection with the art and artist as memories flood back. People tell me, “Yes! That is what it was like! You really captured that feeling, that feeling of freedom.”

Artist Louis Copt was born in Emporia and credits his passion for landscape painting on growing up near the Flint Hills. He graduated from Emporia State University in 1971 with a degree in art and worked as a photographer for the Emporia Gazette among other jobs. After returning from a summer of study in New York in 1985, he dedicated himself to his art full-time. Louis has taught classes at the Lawrence Arts Center for over 14 years, and at KU. He and his wife, Phyllis, live in Lecompton.